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CONTEMPORANEOUS HISTORY: JOSIAH TO EZRA.

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PERIOD I. DECLINE AND FALL OF ASSYRIA.

1. *The last great king of Assyria.*—When Josiah came to the throne (639 B. C.), there were still thirteen years of life left to Assurbanipal, king of Assyria (668–626 B. C.). We know a great deal about this famous ruler, the Sardanapalus of Persian and Grecian legend, of his wars, his public works, his patronage of Babylonian learning, his vast literary and scientific collections. Of the history of his later years (after 642 B. C.) we know little or nothing. It is certain, however, that his empire was vastly abridged and shorn of its splendor before his death, and that thereafter it rapidly collapsed till it was annihilated with the destruction of the capital, Nineveh, in 607 B. C.

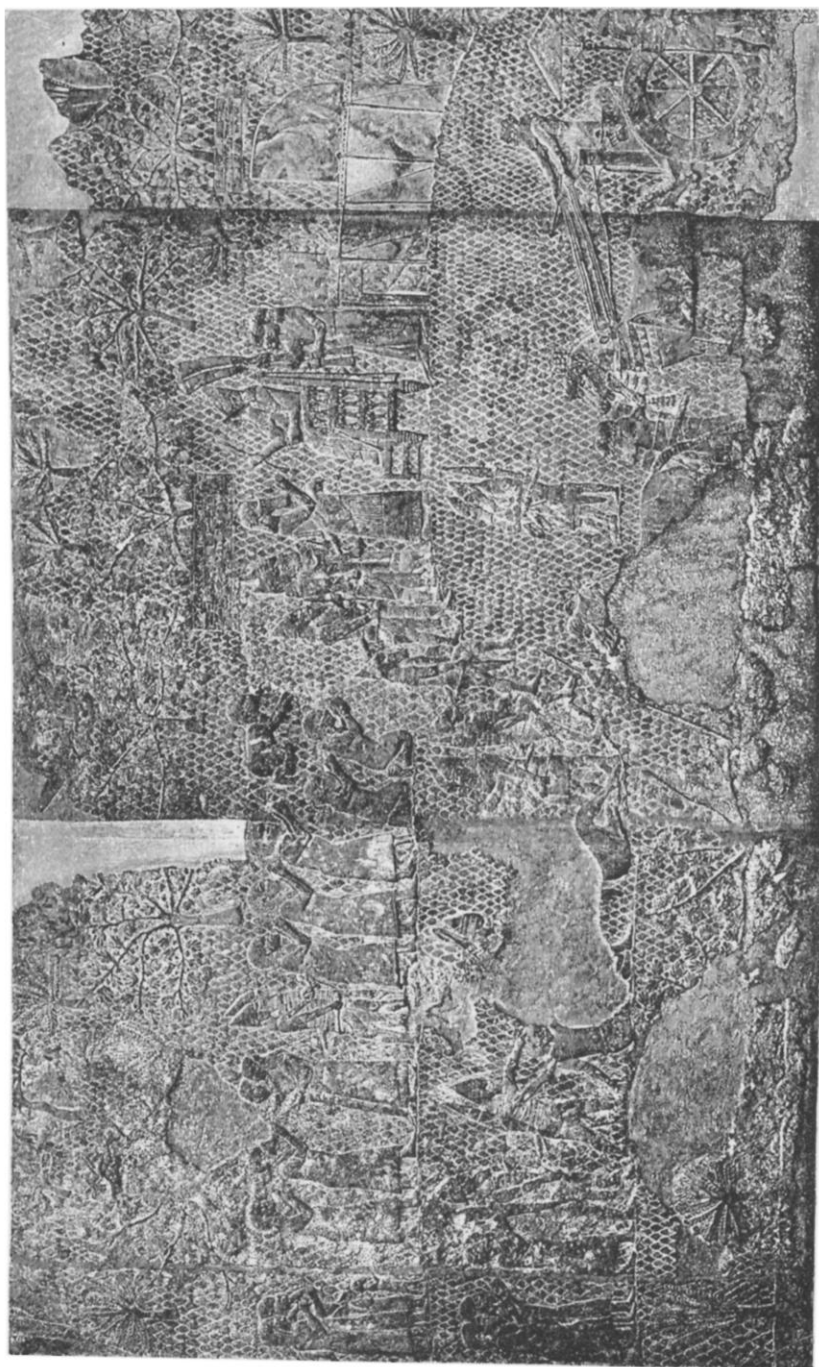
2. *Causes of the catastrophe.*—The ruin of Assyria came from four causes: (1) It was built up and maintained by force alone and was, therefore, without moral or internal cohesiveness. (2) Its central and western portions were ravaged by northern barbarians, especially Scythians, for longer or shorter periods, during more than twenty years, beginning about 635 B. C. These devastations fell wholly within the reign of Josiah, but they touched lightly upon his territory, since it was the rich and fertile plains that the invaders mostly traversed. (3) Insurrec-

tions within the empire. In these the western portions, once so ready to rise, had taken little part since the days of Sennacherib (700 B. C.). The national spirit had been pounded out of them by the Assyrian tyrants, and they had no stomach for aggressive action. Besides, the central authority had been relaxed for many years, and they were no longer squeezed for tribute. In the east the conditions were different. Babylonia, never a willing vassal, had been breeding a virile race of patriots in the south, the Chaldeans, who had been rebelling intermittently for more than a century, and were now waiting an opportunity to strike at the capital. (4) The Aryan Medes, who had borne the Assyrian yoke but lightly, who had consolidated their tribes about 650 B. C. into a kingdom, determined to make an end of the hated Ninevite power. Repeated attempts were made, unsuccessfully, to capture the great city. At last an alliance was made with the Chaldeans, and the combined forces destroyed the Assyrian capital in 607 B. C., obliterating its walls, its towers, and all the guardian fortresses, so that the exact site of the city proper was not known to men till the middle of the present century.

3. *Influence upon Israel*.—The decline of Assyria, while of little direct effect upon Israel, had a great moral influence. The degeneration and perversion of the worship of Israel since the time of Ahaz had been largely due to the prestige of the Assyrian and Babylonian religion, whose cult was much affected by the Judaite princes. Now that such prestige was gone, the reforming party in Jerusalem met with no popular prejudice in favor of a triumphant idolatry and its practices.

#### PERIOD II. THE EGYPTIAN INTERREGNUM.

1. *Attitude of Josiah*.—Judah and Jerusalem were politically but little in sympathy with the movements which led to the fall of Nineveh. During most of the decisive years King Josiah was much occupied with internal reforms; in Israel the policy of reform always included domestic quiet and non-interference with foreign powers or peoples. He doubtless counted himself still a vassal of Assyria, as his father and grandfather had been, but



SENNACHERIB AT LACHISH

active partisanship was out of the question. Least of all was he inclined to change his allegiance.

2. *Egypt and Josiah*.—The time came when Josiah had to take his stand. While Nineveh was still untaken, the head of the new and ambitious Egyptian dynasty of Sais, Pharaoh Necho, became seized with the idea of becoming heir to the moribund Assyrian. He entered Asia with an army, destined finally for an attack upon Nineveh, but to be used immediately for the occupation of the Mediterranean coast land. The course of his expedition led him over the historic plain of Jezreel. Pharaoh doubtless expected that some of the Asiatic provinces would come over to him. Egypt had been their old ally in intrigue and occasionally in war against Assyria. Now that the common oppressor was declining, the ancient bonds might be reunited and Josiah's oath to Asshurbanipal, now thirty years old, might be forgotten. But Josiah had no mind for a new suzerain, especially one who, without his leave, was traversing territory to which he himself had the nearest claim.

3. *The Egyptian conquest*.—To preclude, if possible, Egyptian sovereignty, Josiah marched against the Egyptian army. He was defeated at Megiddo, on the great battlefield of the nations. Being sore wounded by the archers, he was driven in his chariot to Jerusalem, and there he died. The freeholders of Israel raised to the throne his second son, Jehoahaz, to maintain their independence. Necho fixed his headquarters at Riblah, whence he dictated the course of events in Syria and Palestine. A force was sent against Jerusalem. In three months Jehoahaz was brought before him at Riblah. Thence the captive was sent to Egypt, where he died in exile (*cf.* Ezek. 19:4).

4. *The overthrow of Egypt*.—The Pharaoh now placed upon the throne of Judah the more subservient eldest son of Josiah, whose given name, Eliakim, he changed to its synonym, Jehoiakim, to mark the change of masters. For over three years Judah bore the Egyptian yoke as one of the provinces of a dependency that stretched as far northeast as the Euphrates. The yoke was probably not galling, as the Egyptian forces were only competent to keep in subjection a contented foreign realm.

Necho himself was kept busy guarding his eastern frontier. An advance westward of the Chaldean conqueror of Nineveh was to be expected at any time after the fall of that city. The Egyptians did not dare to cross the river, but awaited the attack at Carchemish on the western side. Here they were utterly defeated in 604 B. C., by the Chaldean forces. By this overthrow their hopes of an Asiatic empire were shattered forever.

PERIOD III. THE CHALDEAN RÉGIME.

1. *Israel in vassalage.*—*a) Achievements of Nebuchadrezzar.* Nebuchadrezzar, the conqueror of Pharaoh Necho, was the son of Nabopalassar, and had been his father's lieutenant in the campaign against Nineveh. He was an able general and ruler, and shares with King David, Tiglathpileser III, and Hannibal the distinction of being the greatest of the ancient Semites outside the sphere of religion and morals. His father having died soon after the victory at Carchemish, he came to the kingdom at the very moment when a new determining force was needed to bind and hold together the sundered elements of the old Assyrian empire. He, in fact, was the restorer and the last great champion of Semitism. A faithfully kept compact with the king of the Medes gave him the whole of the proper country of the Semites, while his former ally took control of all the highlands. He held to the old Assyrian policy toward the scattered peoples, but with a firmer, surer, and less violent grasp. At the same time he restored the Semitic hegemony to Babylonia, after its long renunciation. Thus the Babylon of his time became the consummate achievement of Semitism, splendid and opulent, in commerce and industry, religion and literature, the liberal and the mechanic arts.—*b) The Egyptian retreat.* We note particularly that the kings of the Chaldean line claimed to be the successors of the Assyrians, as these in their time had asserted the heirship to the old Babylonians. The Egyptians were regarded as intruders and usurpers in Palestine and Syria. It was also the view of the prophets of Jehovah in Israel that Nebuchadrezzar should rule instead of the Pharaoh (Jer., chaps. 25, 26). But Jehoiakim was a true vassal of Necho, and as Nebuchadrezzar

did not at once return from Babylon after his coronation (604 B. C.), the Judaites did not submit to the new order till the Babylonians appeared in force in 601 B. C. The Egyptians meanwhile had maintained a virtual alliance with Judah, in the vain hope of successful resistance to the Chaldeans, at whose approach they now vanished over the Isthmus.—*c) The first rebellion and captivity.* Nebuchadrezzar, to conciliate the Palestinians, did not treat Jehoiakim as a rebel, but merely demanded homage and tribute. Egypt, however, did not cease its machinations, and, in spite of prophetic warnings, Jehoiakim, after three years, was induced to withhold the tribute. The army of the great king appeared before Jerusalem. Jehoiakim himself died before the surrender. His son Jehoiachin, king for three months, with his mother, the nobles, and defenders of the city, the artificers, and all people of means, 10,000 in number, were deported to Babylonia, and settled beside the canal of Chebar, not far from Nippur (597 B. C.) —*d) The kingdom continued.* The royal household and the temple now alone remained in Jehovah's land as the rallying point of the nation. It was the policy of Nebuchadrezzar to enfeeble but not to obliterate the remnant of Israel, in spite of its disloyalty. Jerusalem was to be destroyed only as a last resort. He did not wish to colonize Judah with foreigners: the experiment had not succeeded in Samaria. Nor did he permit his vassals of Moab and Ammon, hostile as they were to Israel, to do anything more than help to curb its rebellion (2 Kings 24: 2). With the hope that it might still take his part against Egypt he, contrary to precedent, continued to it the semblance of autonomy, and raised to the throne a third son of Josiah, changing to Zedekiah his original name, Mattaniah. Under this last king of Judah, the city and country revived in some measure; and all might have been well but for the incurable infatuation that threw the court once more into the treacherous arms of Egypt.—*e) Final rebellion and exile.* It was in Zedekiah's ninth year that the fatal step was taken, and before its close Jerusalem was invested (January, 587). For a time the delusive hope prevailed in the city, against the true prophetic warning, that Jehovah would not forsake his temple and people. The

approach of an Egyptian army of relief seemed to justify them ; but, after the manner of Egypt, it retired before the Chaldean army which temporarily withdrew to meet it. The reinvestment now brought a hopeless panic to the besieged. They supposed that even surrender would not appease the outraged suzerain. In vain the prophet Jeremiah insisted that surrender would be their only salvation. In July of 586 a breach was made in the walls on the north of the city. The king and his party escaped through the royal gardens into the Arabah road, but were there overtaken and brought to Nebuchadrezzar at Riblah. The city was burned to the ground, the temple plundered and likewise destroyed. At Riblah, where sentence was pronounced against all the rebels, Zedekiah and about sixty of the leading men were put to death. The second and final deportation was made, including nearly all of the responsible property holders. Babylonia itself was again the destination of the exiles. Some of the people, loyal to Babylon, and the proletariat, were left in the land, to keep it from becoming a waste. Over these was placed, at Mizpah, a native governor, Gedaliah, who, however, was soon assassinated by a fanatical, discontented Israelite at the instance of the hostile Ammonites. A remnant then betook themselves to the Egyptian borderland, accompanied by the prophet Jeremiah, who died in their midst, protesting against their persistent idolatry. This section of emigrants, unlike the Babylonian exiles, had no part in the national revival.

2. *Israel in the exile*.—To understand the subsequent history of Israel, the main features and events of the residence in Babylon are to be studied. We notice:—a) *The character of the Babylonian empire*. Nebuchadrezzar's long reign (604–562 B. C.) and his statesmanlike genius gave the Semitic world a period of combined peace and prosperity. His ambition was great, but was regulated by practical aims. He attempted no conquests outside of the Semitic nation and Egypt, its appendage. His chief energies were given to the development of the empire and the glory of Babylonia. His treatment of the subject states, even if rebels, aimed not at revenge, but the utilization of their services. Hence he granted the deported peoples



a large degree of freedom within their proper districts.—*b) The environment of the exiles.* The Judaites, as an industrious, energetic people, were wisely placed in Babylonia proper, where the most varied employments were open to them. It was a land of large cities and fruitful fields; one great plain intersected with many canals, large and small, that ran between the two main rivers or close beside them; many of them navigable, all of them serving for drainage and irrigation. Babylonia was at once the garden, the emporium, the workshop, and the university of Asia. The whole aspect of the country, a vast monotonous level, furnished to the immigrants an additional contrast with their own land of mountains and valleys and running brooks. Other novel features were the vast throngs of people engaged in trade and commerce, in manufactures, and in building operations of all sorts. Most impressive of all were the magnificent temples, each a scene of varied and elaborate religious rites, a center of the science and scholarship of the time, and even of business and monetary interests.—*c) Social and industrial condition of the exiles.* The two bands deported in 597 and 586 were placed not far apart from one another, so that they really made one community. The old Assyrian policy had aimed to disintegrate as well as to denationalize rebellious peoples. Nebuchadrezzar could afford to conserve them for the good of his larger state. He did not make slaves of all, or even of most, of these exiles, else they would have been at once absorbed in the Babylonian population. We know, indeed, that many of them engaged in business and attained to wealth. Moreover, like the modern Jews, by their abilities and pertinacity some of them forced their way to high positions in business and in the state.—*d) Their religious condition.* In general, if we wish to know the life of Israel in exile, we should fix our minds upon the life of Babylonia as a whole, especially that of the lower and middle classes. There is one department which we must except—that of religion. It is a great marvel of history that the Hebrews, unlike other peoples, did not dissolve and perish in exile. The chief reason was that they maintained their religion separately. It is a wonderful paradox that what Babylonia did to their hurt

in the centuries before the exile it undid in the years of banishment. Israel could superadd to a simple ritual, like that of Jerusalem, some of the more seductive features of the elaborate cult of Babylon. But to substitute the one for the other was found to be impossible. It was one thing to ape the foreign fashion; another thing to make it the habit of life. They recoiled from the rites and usages of the Babylonian religion, partly because these were strange and "unclean," partly because they were gross and revolting, and partly on account of surviving loyalty to Jehovah and his temple.—*e*) *Their religious development.* Hence one of the chief modes in which the Hebrews were influenced by Babylonia was this indirect influence upon their religion. Observe how special causes coöperated. (*a*) The loss of the temple and its services was not an unmixed evil. It was these that encouraged the old idolatrous or compromising practices in Jerusalem. On the other hand, the observances by which the religious habit was kept up, such as prayer, fasting, sabbath-keeping, were of themselves spiritual and purifying. It is true that in these very matters many became in large measure material and formal, and were rebuked therefor by their prophets; but reformation was in this sphere more feasible than in that of public ritual. Idolatry itself, and, indeed, some of the most abhorrent practices of the time and country, were followed by some of the people from first to last in Babylonia; but the true Israel, separated as the wheat from the chaff, grew ever stronger. (*β*) The prophetic word was vindicated and reinforced. The word of the prophets in the home-land, especially that of Jeremiah, had been verified, and Jeremiah's message to the first band of exiles in Babylonia (Jer., chap. 29) now came with convincing power as well as comfort. Ezekiel's utterance was not only stern against idolatry, but most timely and helpful in its assertion of individual responsibility. Now that the nation had perished, each man must and should stand for himself before God—a doctrine which created potentially the cause of religious and civil independence in human history. The "second Isaiah" united the duties of the present with hopes of the future. He preached that, while Jehovah was the God of Israel in spite of

the loss of the temple, he was also the God of the whole earth. Indeed, this was proved by providential care for his people away from Jehovah's land. His providence is universal and omnipotent, and will never fail his people. Israel itself is to be refined and saved through suffering. Hence the "suffering servant" is the minister of God and will be a ransom for many. —f) *Their political outlook.* Such teaching and preaching had its effect both in the religious and the political sphere. A practical turn was given to the promises of the future. That the remnant of Israel was to have a future seemed not incredible. A patriotic feeling was possible from the beginning. The little colony represented an organized state with a long and tragic history behind it, with a simple and elastic civil constitution adapted to the strain of all new conditions. King and court could be dispensed with in Israel alone among ancient monarchies. Reinstatement in the fatherland was the dream of the exiles almost from the beginning. This hope, though often rebuked, could not be foregone. The prospect of the nation's redemption through its suffering held out by the second Isaiah in the closing years fitted in well with the signs of the times. Babylon was decaying. The successors of Nebuchadnezzar understood nothing of ruling a great empire. Nabonidus, the last of them, was a religious and antiquarian devotee who neglected his state and people. Discontent was rife in Babylonia, and the Hebrews suffered greatly from the misgovernment. Cyrus, the Persian, who from being chief of a petty principality had become ruler of Media in 550, conqueror of Lydia and the Grecian colonies in 546, and was thus made master of hither Asia from the Persian gulf to the Ægean sea, was now announced by Isaiah as the coming deliverer. When in July, 538, Babylon opened to receive him as conqueror and king, the promised deliverance of Israel was at hand.

#### PERIOD IV. THE PERSIAN PROTECTORATE.

1. *Cyrus the Great.*—The chief factor in the new order of things was the personality of Cyrus. The times were ripe for a new adjustment; but he himself changed the age and the course

of history. His only compeers in influence in the ancient world are Alexander of Macedon and Julius Cæsar. His deeds are well known to all students. His character and work deserve special study. He was of Persian descent, with small hereditary possessions in Elam, but his spirit was cosmopolitan, and his genius fitted him to deal with all the heterogeneous races of the world. He swayed men and nations with equal facility and by the same sort of faculty, winning their allegiance by winning their hearts. He was magnanimous, considerate, tolerant, as well as wise and daring.

2. *The new policy.*—The character of Cyrus is monumentally transfused into the Persian policy. Tiglathpileser III, Nebuchadrezzar, and Cyrus stand for three oriental types of government. The first aimed to rule the people by denationalizing and disintegrating; the second by denationalizing and conserving; the third by local protection and personal oversight. His governors, like-minded with himself, were not mere tax-gatherers or slave-drivers. Appointed to guard the interests of their subjects, they became known as “benefactors” (Luke 22:25). Under him and his successors religious wars of the Assyrian or Semitic type were unknown. The peoples were protected, and even encouraged, in their own religions wherever his banner was seen. The regard which he showed for the Hebrews may have been due in part to sympathy with their spiritual religion, for he doubtless was a Zoroastrian; but he acknowledged also the rights of Merodach in Babylon, according to his own inscriptions.

3. *The Hebrews after the revolution.*—The most notable change of policy introduced by Cyrus was the reversal of the old Assyrian device of subduing by deportation. Possibly permission to return to their homes and the ancient shrines of their gods was given to others besides the Hebrews. But probably no others were in the mood, if any were in the position, to accept. At any rate, the favor shown to Israel was distinguished and lasting. The proclamation amounted to a general invitation to all Hebrews to return to Palestine, and substantial help for the journey was freely promised. Many availed themselves of the offer, and under the new governor, Zerubbabel, the great emigra-

tion took place. Henceforward for over a century we have to deal with peculiar political conditions which are often misconceived. Note: (1) Israel was not now in any sense a corporate unit, though one in sentiment, belief, and custom. (2) The moving force in Israel came often, not from Jerusalem, but from Babylon. Possibly not the majority of the Hebrews in Babylonia returned to Palestine. Certainly the richer and more influential part remained behind. Their motives were various. Some of the more prosperous were unwilling to relinquish their gains. Some held Zionism to be utopian. Some stayed behind, so as to better support their dependents in Palestine or in Babylonia. Some remained in positions of trust, so as to use their influence for the cause of Zion. These last performed perhaps the most signal and lasting service by their activity both in the old and in the adopted home. (3) Hence the development of Israel, or of Judaism, as we may now call it, was perhaps promoted as much by the Babylonian as by the Palestinian Hebrews. The intellectual, moral, and financial strength of Israel in Babylonia had its influence secured by the solidarity of the people of Jehovah in both communities. (4) The Persian government itself had much to do indirectly, and perhaps directly also, with the molding of both the civil and ecclesiastical life of the new Israel. Its paternal care for the provinces found expression in devising or promoting measures for the building up and strengthening of church and state organization.

4. *The new settlement.*—To follow in detail the progress of the restored Jerusalem is here impossible. The elements of the situation lie clearly before us. The difficulties were enormous, and long disappointment took the place of the first enthusiasm of the returning exiles. The conditions to be fulfilled were mainly these: (1) To build up the ecclesiastical system in the direction of the impulse already given in Babylonia. Deuteronomy had been the mainstay in the first part of the exile; the ideas and plans of Ezekiel took hold of the later generation and guided the beginnings of the new enterprise. (2) To keep free from contact with the heathen and semi-heathen peoples of Palestine. Hence the emphasis now placed on laws of uncleanness.

(3) To restore the temple and perpetuate a legal authoritative priesthood. (4) To baffle the machinations of the rival peoples around, and to retain the favor of the Persian court in spite of their intrigues and calumnies. (5) To defend the city against marauding bands; to give to Jerusalem security and dignity by restoring its walls and fortifications. (6) To quell internal feuds and assure equal justice to all classes of the people.

5. *The final achievement.*—Not one of these ends was attained without a weary struggle. Three generations passed ere the consummation came. Looking back from the era of Ezra and Nehemiah, we can only point to the delays induced by class dissensions and by popular indifference; the efforts of Zerubabel and his helpers the prophets Haggai and Zachariah, ending in the completion of the temple under Darius; the interdicts of the imperial government secured by the slanders and artifices of the rival communities; the varying attitude of the court under Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes, until the decisive favor of Artaxerxes Longimanus determined the political situation; the mission of Ezra and Nehemiah, under the auspices of Artaxerxes; the introduction of a completer and more drastic law by Ezra, which settled the status and duties of the several orders in church and state; the practical reforms of Nehemiah, without which the law could have neither footing nor sanction; the building of the wall, without which Jerusalem had scarcely been a city; the rising and falling of the Messianic hope, and the conversion of religious and patriotic fervor into the steady, well-regulated observance of precept and ritual.

Finally, we think of the story of Providence, of the completed Old Testament revelation, of the Jewish community keeping its faith during the four dark centuries; and as we look back upon the exiles beside the streams of Babylon, it is not too much for us to say that, while the triumphs of Cyrus shook the earth, the return of the little band of Hebrews to Zion shook, not the earth only, but also the heavens.